The Blooming of the Lotus:

The Nature of No-birth and No-death

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Today is the 3rd of May, 1998, and we are in the Upper Hamlet in our spring retreat. Today is the first of three dharma talks to be given in English.

Last year during the summer there were so many children, who came from many countries, and I offered each of them one lotus seed sent to me from Vietnam, and each little boy or little girl came up here and received one lotus seed. I gave them instructions on how to plant the lotus seed, and this year they are going to come back and report to me how they have done. You know that in Plum Village we have lotus ponds in the Upper Hamlet, in the Lower Hamlet and also in the New Hamlet, and each summer we see so many lotus flowers blooming. That is a joy. It has been a joy for many of us. And many people who come to Plum Village see the lotus flower for the first time in their lives. A reporter from Paris said in a television program that lotus flowers grow like mushrooms in Dordogne. That is not true. The lotus flowers here in Plum Village come from Vietnam in the form of little seeds,

and we have tried to make the lotus flowers bloom in Plum Village. We have succeeded, and this year we have meditated deeply about the nature of no-birth and no-death of the lotus flowers. We will continue to do so throughout the year.

There is a professor of biology in the University of California at Los Angeles. In 1982 she went to China, to visit the Biology Institute of Beijing, and she got five lotus seeds that were described as very, very old. These lotus seeds had been discovered as a result of excavation in North China, where they found many hundreds of lotus seeds. So she was able to receive five of them, and she brought them back to North America. In November 1995, she tried to plant three seeds. One did not grow, and two of them sprouted. The first one, having sprouted, she took it out and she burned it at a high temperature, in order to find out how old the lotus seed was, by a procedure called carbon dating. She found out that the lotus seed was 1,288 years old. It had been kept in the soil for a long time, and it could preserve life for that long period of time. It was amazing.

In order for a lotus seed to sprout you have to cut the skin, or rub the lotus seed against a rock until the skin of the seed becomes very thin in just one place, so that the water can penetrate, and only with the penetration of the water

can the lotus seed sprout. Otherwise the lotus seed will stay there for a long time without sprouting. Or you might use a knife and cut a little bit of the skin so that you allow the water to penetrate into the lotus seed.

There are many seeds that our ancestors have transmitted to us, but if we don't know how to handle these seeds, they will not be able to sprout. We have the seed of enlightenment; we have the seed of compassion, of love, of joy, transmitted by our ancestors, our blood ancestors and also our spiritual ancestors. They are all in us, because our body and our consciousness are the soil containing these seeds. Our practice is to look deeply into our body, into our consciousness, in order to recognize all the seeds that have been transmitted by our ancestors. There are negative seeds, the seeds of suffering, of despair, of discrimination, of anger, but there are seeds of love, of forgiveness, of joy, of enlightenment. That is why in our daily life we should try our best to get in touch with these seeds and try to handle them with care, with love, and with gratitude.

There are some of us who believe that they are not capable of loving, they are afraid of loving, and they believe that the seed of love is not in them. They have tried several times, and they did not succeed in loving. Every time they tried to love they suffered, so they are afraid even of love. Meanwhile, the seed of love in them is very important, it is very strong, and they don't know how to manage the seed of love in them in order for the seed to sprout. Just like a lotus seed, you must know how to handle it in order for the seed to sprout.

So when someone tells you that she is not capable of loving, that there is no love in her, there is no joy in her, there is no happiness in her, you have to look at her with your compassionate eyes and you say to her, "That is not true my dear, you have the seed of love within yourself, you have the seed of peace, of enlightenment, of forgiveness, within yourself. You have to recognize them; you have to learn how to take good care of them and to help them to sprout. The Buddha is someone that can help you to recognize these seeds and how to make them sprout. Your teacher is also someone who can help you to do this, and the Sangha, with your brothers and sisters, is also capable of helping you to look into yourself and recognize these seeds in you, and to practice in such a way that the seeds will have an opportunity to sprout and become flowers.

Many of us recognize the Buddha, *Shakyamuni*, to be one of our spiritual ancestors, and we call ourselves Buddhists because we recognize the Buddha as a teacher, an ancestor, a big brother on the path. And we know that he has transmitted to us so many wholesome seeds. The Buddha has transmitted so many positive seeds that humanity has not been able to use them all. There are seeds that need very special circumstances to sprout. Unless there is a fire in the forest, the skin of these seeds cannot be burned, and the seeds cannot sprout. Everywhere, like in North America, there is a kind of tree that gives out seeds that cannot be sprouted unless there is a fire. And after the fire there is always rain. The fire will burn the skin of the seed, and when the rain falls the seed has an opportunity to sprout.

I have always taught that the war in Vietnam was a big fire, and during that big fire many wonderful seeds transmitted by the Buddha were able to sprout. After the fire there is always rain, and one of the seeds that sprouted during the war in Vietnam is the seed of engaged Buddhism, Buddhism engaged in our daily lives. We bring Buddhism into the situation of utmost suffering in our lives, and we find that it works. Buddhism can relieve the suffering. Buddhism need not be only in the monastery--Buddhism can be brought into the situation of utmost suffering. The expression "engaged Buddhism" was born in Vietnam during the war, and I was one, among others, who promoted the teaching of Engaged Buddhism. Where there is suffering, Buddhism must be there, in order to serve. And the seed of the practice will help us not to surrender to despair, to continue so that peace and reconciliation can become a reality.

I remember one day that many young people came to me with a lot of despair. It was in Vietnam about 1962 or 1963, and they sat around me and they looked at me and they said, "Thay, do you think that there is a chance for peace at all? Because we have been working very hard for peace, but there is no sign of peace in sight." By that time it was very difficult for me to give an answer, because I also felt very much the same way: we had struggled, we had worked very hard to end the war, we had done everything we could, yet the situation did not seem to move at all. And the seed of despair was there, very strong in all of us. So when I saw young people looking at me and asking the question, I could not answer right away. I knew that I had to give an answer from my heart, but in my heart there was not a lot of hope. The element of despair was much bigger.

In *Tra Loc*, a village where our Buddhist social workers used to work hard, the airplanes came and bombed, and destroyed the village that we had built. *Tra Loc* is in *Quang Tri* Province, not very far from my native village. It was very close to the Demilitarized Zone. In the vicinity of Saigon we had the School of Youth for Social Service.

We trained young social workers and sent them to the countryside in order to rebuild the villages that had been destroyed by the bombing in the war. And among these young social workers were many young monks and nuns. We practiced engaged Buddhism, we did not practice only in the meditation hall, but we practiced right in the war zone. And a number of us died during service. So *Tra Loc* was one of the villages where we went to work: we built the village of *Tra Loc* and after that it was bombed to zero. The social workers sent news to Saigon and asked me whether they should rebuild the village or not, and I said, "Rebuild it." So our social workers rebuilt the village with the villagers, and not long after that the village was bombed again, for the second time.

You know how we felt when we heard news like that from our headquarters situated in the vicinity of Saigon. We could not afford to allow the seed of despair to overcome that is why we decided to rebuild it again. And we had to invest a lot of workers, time, energy, and even money in order to rebuild the village. And after that it was bombed for the third time, and yet with a lot of suffering in our hearts we decided to rebuild it for the third time. There was speculation that we were not very intelligent—why rebuild something that will be destroyed? We heard this kind of criticism, but we could not afford to have the seed of despair overwhelm people; that is why we gave the order to rebuild again. It was about that time that the young people came to me, and they sat around me and they looked at me, and they said, "Thay, do you think we have any hope at all? Will the war ever end?" And I looked at them, and I knew I could not tell a lie. If I allowed my despair to burst out, then all these young people would be drowned in the ocean of despair, so I sat very still and I practiced mindful breathing, and I contemplated impermanence, non-self. Everything is impermanent, including the war: the war has to end someday. So when I saw that I said, "My dear friends, the war is going to end, because everything is impermanent. The war is impermanent, therefore the war has to end some day. Let us try to keep the seed of hope alive. We have to hold to each other in order to continue." And it came from my heart, from my meditation.

I had a disciple whose name was *Nhat Tri*. He was a monk, a young monk, and he was an excellent social worker in the School of Youth for Social Service. One day he was walking in the city of Saigon, and an American soldier standing on a military truck spat on his head. At that time the press and other media tried to describe the Buddhists as supporting the Communists, and disguised as Buddhists in order to defeat the American forces in Vietnam. That is why the American military men saw Communists everywhere, and they saw a Buddhist monk and they thought that this monk must be a disguised Communist, so out of anger the soldier spat on the head of Brother *Nhat Tri*. And Brother *Nhat Tri* was deeply hurt. He came home and he cried a lot, and he could not contain his anger. He said that he was going to join the National Liberation Front to fight the Americans. And I had to hold him for a long time, maybe ten or fifteen minutes, and I said, "My son, my child, you were not born to hold a gun. You were born in order to hold compassion, a lotus flower. It is with a lotus flower that you can best serve humanity and your people. Violence will lead to violence. You have to stick to our conviction that only compassion, love and understanding can respond to hate and violence." After that he agreed to stay on with the School of Youth for Social Service. He is the big brother of many monks and nuns here, but he was lost in mission, and we could not find him anymore.

Finally the war ended, and many of us were not allowed to continue our service in a formal way, because the new government did not allow us to continue social service. They said they don’t need us. The School of Youth for Social Service was not allowed to continue, so we organized the kind of work, which is considered to be without form. Our social workers continue to help people, but silently, and over here our friends try to support the work in Vietnam in several ways. They have continued to work without having a name, without having a form, until today. Working like that is to continue to nourish the seed of compassion, of love, of understanding, in each of us. We continue to help villagers to build schools and bridges. We have built quite a lot of bridges called "The Bridge of Understanding," "The Bridge of Love." We have continued to build schools with the assistance of the villagers, and we have invented the time of "school –home," where the children come and live for one day, the whole day there, and have a meal at noon. And they go home to sleep. The next morning they come back to learn, and at mealtime they have a meal, and we try to give each of them one glass of milk a day. A glass of milk is very important because many children are undernourished, and one glass of milk is very helpful. I always tell my students here that they can do a lot, they don’t have to feel helpless because there are many things they can do: to offer a child in a poor village in a remote area a glass of soy milk or cow milk is very important. And our social workers, who take the children in the morning, and feed them at noontime, they put their love into the work. They cook lunch in such a way that the lunch can provide some nutrition, so the children will not suffer malnutrition. They always try to provide a glass of milk.

My mother came from a village not very far from *Tra Loc,* the name of the village is *Ha Trung***.** It’s a very poor village, and once when I looked very deeply at the faces of many children in the village, little boys and little girls,

each little girl became my mother. My mother had been a little girl like that, and if you could give her a glass of milk every day she would be able to give birth to a little boy like me, but if she is not given a glass of milk, then she will not be able to give birth to a healthy child. So I asked my students, my social workers, to take care of the little boys and the little girls in the village, because each of them is my mother, each of them is my father. And that is not only true in the village of *Ha Trung*, but it is true in every village.

If you feel helpless, you cannot do anything for the world. You know that that feeling of helplessness should not be there, because in fact there are many ways you can be of service to the world: You can give me a glass of milk when I am still very young, one or two years old, so that in the future I will be able to grow up normally and become a good citizen of my country and of the world. And there are ways to do it, to assist monks and nuns and lay people and social workers in Africa, in Asia, in underdeveloped countries, in order to change the situation in a significant way. There are always dharma doors through which you can enter reality and improve the quality of life.

(Bell)

There is a seed transmitted by the Buddha, that we try to grow here in Plum Village: The teaching on how to live deeply in the present moment, to establish ourselves in the here and the now, to live deeply every moment of our daily life in order to touch the depth of life in every moment *drsta dharma sukha vihari***,** 'living happily in the present moment'. There are many Buddhist centers where we practice in order to arrive at a state of being that may only be possible in the future, or we wish to be reborn in the Pure Land of the Buddha after so many years of practice. But the practice in Plum Village is different. We know that the pure land is in the here and the now. Enlightenment, understanding and awakening, all of that should be found in the present moment, and therefore we have to go back to the present moment in order to touch them. If you know how to do that then you can have peace and stability and compassion right away in this moment. Every step you make can bring you stability and freedom and joy. And you can practice so that during the time that you have lunch, peace and stability and joy can be possible also. The teaching of dwelling firmly in the present moment is a kind of seed transmitted by the Buddha, and in Plum Village we try to make it sprout for the happiness, for the joy of so many people.

The teaching of the Buddha is based on the Four Noble Truths and in Chinese it is translated as the Four Holy Truths. And the First Holy Truth is suffering, pain, *dukkha*. The first truth is that suffering *is*. The question may be why suffering is described as a holy truth. What is so holy about suffering? Can we see the element of holiness in suffering? Why do we call suffering a holy truth, when people suffer everywhere? It is because in the teachings of the Buddha, it is by looking deeply into the nature of our suffering that we can find a way out. If you throw away suffering, if you try to run away from your suffering, then you will never have a chance to see the way out of suffering. Stay with your suffering, hold it, and look deeply into it: that is the only way to transform the suffering, to get out of suffering. And that is why suffering is a holy truth. If you allow yourself to be drowned in the ocean of suffering, if you allow suffering to overwhelm you, then suffering will not be holy anymore. Suffering is holy when you know how to handle it. How to embrace it, how to look deeply into it. And the practice is about looking deeply into the nature of our suffering, not trying to run away from it. The moment when you stop running, the moment when you have the courage to look into the nature of your suffering, holiness is there. The moment when mindfulness becomes an energy in yourself, the moment when you use the energy of mindfulness to look into the heart of suffering, the element of holiness is there. Holiness is not something that only the Pope and the Dalai Lama have; holiness is there every time we generate the energy of mindfulness in order to look, and to touch life.

Mindfulness brings about understanding, compassion, and forgiveness, we know that. That is why mindfulness is holy in its nature. When you use the energy of mindfulness to look into suffering, you make the element of holiness real. One day a young man asked Mother Theresa, "Are you a holy person?" and Mother Theresa said, "Yes, and so are you too." And that is true, we all have the seed of holiness within us, and if only we know how to touch the seed of holiness, holiness will become an energy. And to me, mindfulness is one very important seed of holiness. The moment when you begin to walk mindfully, the element of holiness is in you. When you walk mindfully with every step you get more solidity, you get more peace, you get more freedom, and holiness is with you. In the Catholic mass the priest always says, "God be with you," and the audience responds, "And with you too." Here is not a statement, here is not a wish, here is a practice. The moment when you go back to your breath and you breathe mindfully, holiness is there, because mindfulness is the substance of holiness. God is there; the Holy Spirit is there at the same time. And when you sit mindfully, enjoying your breathing, I am sure that the element of holiness is there, protecting you, making life possible at that moment. And when you walk mindfully, the element of holiness is there, protecting you, making you more stable, and more open. And holiness is our practice.

We have to keep the element of holiness alive in every moment of our daily life, for our sake and for the sake of the people around us. The Buddha was a human being, like all of us. Because he practiced mindfulness, concentration and insight, the element of holiness was in him. And in Buddhism we speak of a race called "the race of holy beings".

(Thay writes Chinese characters for "holy truth" and "race of holy beings.")

This is the word for holy truth. It is interesting to see the Chinese mentality. "Holy" is made of an ear, a mouth, and a king. When you become the king of your mouth and your ear, you are holy. When you speak mindfully, when you listen mindfully, you master the art of speaking and listening you are holy person. This is the ear, this is the mouth, and this is the king. You should be the king of your mouth and your ear, and you will not cause a lot of suffering to other people. This is "Holy Truth", and the race of saints. If you belong to a Sangha, a community that practices mindfulness, you belong to the race of the holy people, the Buddha, the bodhisattvas, the patriarchs, the disciples and the disciples of their disciples. They are always devoted to the practice of mindfulness, of concentration and insight; therefore they perpetuate the race of the saints, the holy people. And we have the duty to keep that race continued.

We should not have any kind of complex. Every time we are animated we are inhabited by the energy of mindfulness, the element of holiness is in us. The energy of mindfulness, can be described as the energy of the Holy Spirit, because when you are animated by the Holy Spirit you are alive, you are compassionate, you have the power to understand, to forgive. And the same thing is true with the energy of mindfulness: when you are mindful you are attentive, you are concentrated, and therefore you have the capacity of seeing things deeply, of understanding, of accepting, of forgiving, of loving. Our practice is to be holy in every moment of our daily lives. When I see you walking mindfully, or doing things mindfully, I am inspired by your being, and I begin to be mindful myself. That is why it’s very important that when our friends come to Plum Village they see everyone walking mindfully, doing things mindfully, and breathing mindfully, or cooking mindfully. By being mindful you are capable of living deeply each moment of your daily life. You get the protection, you are able to forgive, to understand and to accept and to be compassionate towards the people around you. The sunshine embraces all vegetation and it helps the vegetation to grow and to become green. The energy of mindfulness is like that also. If we allow the energy of mindfulness to be within ourselves, every minute, every second of our daily life will be deep, and peace and stability and freedom can be there for us and for the people who live around us.

(Bell)

Enlightenment, compassion and understanding should not be abstract ideas -- they should become reality in our daily lives. When you pay attention to your in-breath and out-breath that is already a form of enlightenment. Breathing in, I know I am breathing in, breathing out I know I am breathing out, and I enjoy my breathing. That is already the beginning of enlightenment. There are so many people who breathe in and breathe out and yet they don’t know that they are breathing in and out. When you breathe in, you know that you are breathing in and you feel that you are alive. And to know that you are alive is a wonderful thing to practice, because so many people live and yet they are not aware that they are alive. To be alive, and to know that you are alive, is the greatest of all miracles. When you sit, breathe in and become aware of the fact that you are still alive. There will some day be a moment when you are about to die, and no matter what you try you will not be able to stand up and sit and enjoy your breathing in and out, and enjoy your mindful walking anymore. And no matter what your friends try to do they will not be able to help you to stand up and make steps like you do during walking meditation. So during the time you sit, or you walk, become aware of the fact that you are alive. To be still alive, and breathing in and out and making steps on this planet is a wonderful thing, and that is already an enlightenment; that enlightenment brings a lot of joy and peace to you.

When you are mindful, you are fully present. When you are fully present, life is available to you. When you drink a glass of water mindfully, you are there, one hundred percent of yourself. And since you are there one hundred percent of yourself, the glass of water is also there one hundred percent of itself, and the encounter between you and the water is very deep. The fact that you drink the glass of water in mindfulness is a holy thing in itself. There are many ways of drinking your water, but there is only way that can make life possible, that can make yourself and the water holy, and that is to drink it mindfully, and you know that you can do it. Every time you lift up a glass of water and drink it, drink it in mindfulness that is your practice.

And when you have your lunch, spend one hour or forty-five minutes eating in such a way that every moment of

your lunch becomes a holy moment. You are totally yourself, you are totally present, so the lunch is present, and the community with whom you share the meal is also a holy community. During that time all of us are protected by the energy of mindfulness. We generate the energy of mindfulness that will protect us, that will make life deep, and anyone who comes and touches the Sangha in that moment will touch holiness, and they will have a chance to go back to themselves, also generating the energy of mindfulness. So remember what Mother Theresa said to the young man, when he asked her, "Are you a holy person?" and she smiled without complex and she said, "Yes, I am, and you are too." Everyone can be a holy person when they are mindful, when they are truly present and living deeply every moment of their daily life.

The energy of mindfulness carries within itself the energy of concentration. This is easy to understand. When you look at something mindfully, when you drink some water mindfully, you are concentrated on what you see and what you drink, and therefore mindfulness is pregnant with concentration. And if you live concentrated in every minute of your daily life, then insight will come, because when you are concentrated you begin to see things more deeply. The true nature of reality will reveal itself to you, and when you can see things deeply like that, you will no longer make mistakes. You will no longer be a victim of ignorance. Understanding things as they are, free from craving, you will become an instrument of the dharma for the world. Everyone you touch, everything you touch will become holy, just because there is the element of holiness within yourself. Everything, everyone you touch can be healed can be transformed. It is reported that anyone who was touched by Jesus Christ was healed of his or her illness. We can believe it, because in the person of Jesus Christ there was the energy of the Holy Spirit, and when you are motivated, when you are inhabited by the Holy Spirit, you have the power of being there, of looking deeply, of forgiving, of being compassionate, and all these elements have the power of healing. Everyone of us is like that also. If we allow the energy of mindfulness to be born in us, if we know how to live each moment of our daily life mindfully, then the elements of concentration, insight, liberation, compassion will be in us, and everyone we touch will be healed, everything we touch will recover its beauty and sanity. So our practice is crucial, and the Buddha has instructed us on how to practice mindfulness, concentration and insight.

We should learn to live and practice as a Sangha, as a family, and this is very important. When you look into a lotus pond, you realize that the lotus flowers, the lotus roots, the lotus leaves, they practice very much in the same way: they support each other, they nourish each other. In the beginning, as we say, there were only one or two lotus seeds. And we know how to handle them, and that is why the lotus seeds have sprouted, and now we have two lotus ponds in the Upper Hamlet, one big lotus pond in the Lower Hamlet, and two in the New Hamlet. Now it is the month of May, and lotus leaves begin to show themselves in a kind of rebirth.

Visualize yourself as a lotus leaf, at the surface of the water. You are green, you are beautiful, you breathe, you receive the sunshine, and you grow. Underneath you are connected to the lotus roots. In every moment of your daily life you enjoy the sunshine, you enjoy displaying your beauty, your health, and at the same time you nourish the roots underneath. You are being nourished by the lotus roots, but you also, by your life, nourish the lotus roots. Usually we tend to believe that the leaf is the child of the tree, but in fact the leaf is also the mother of the tree. The water and the minerals brought into the tree by the roots will be sent to every leaf, and the leaves have to work to receive the sunshine and the gas in the air in order to transform the water and the minerals into elaborated sap, to nourish the sap, and to send it back to nourish the trunk of the tree, the root of the tree. So we can say that the tree, the trunk, is the mother of the leaves, but we can say also that the leaves are the mother of the tree – they nourish each other. So it is the lotus root that sends up the young leaf, and by living its life, receiving the sunshine and the gas, and becoming alive in every moment, that young leaf nourishes itself and the roots underneath, and somehow it nourishes the other flowers and leaves as well.

So let us visualize ourselves as a lotus leaf, and in our daily life we practice walking, we practice breathing, we practice smiling, and we practice sitting so we can bloom like a beautiful leaf. At the same time we nourish our teacher, we nourish our younger brother, we nourish our big sisters. And that really is what we do every day. You are connected to every member of the Sangha in a very wonderful way, and you have to be able to see it. Every smile you make, every compassionate look you can offer can bring joy to your teacher, to your brothers and to your sisters. It is not for you alone, it is for all of us. Every time you are capable of overcoming an irritation, and you can smile, you nourish all of us. Not only do you nourish yourself, but you also nourish all of us. Every time you can address your words with kindness and compassion to your brother or your sister in the Sangha, you are really nourishing us, you are bringing a lot of joy, a lot of nutrition to all of us. And in fact we inter-are.

On the surface it looks like this flower and this leaf are two different entities, but if you go deep into reality, you know that this is because that is, and that is because this is. That is the teaching of inter-being. The flower also

displays her beauty; the flower also fabricates the lotus seeds. But you cannot say that only the flower fabricates the lotus seeds. You, as a leaf, fabricate the lotus seed also, because while you are there you are nourishing the whole Sangha of lotus roots, and that is how you contribute to the manufacture of lotus seeds. You cannot say that only the lotus flower makes lotus seeds, all the roots and all the leaves contribute to making the lotus seeds. So you are nourishing the whole Sangha by your being there and by your practice. You have to see yourself in every member of the Sangha. And you are extremely important. If you suffer, if you experience a setback, the whole Sangha will receive that. And if you are capable of being joyful, of being liberated, then it will be for the sake of all of us in the Sangha. So not only do you live for yourself, but you live for all of us, and you produce not only a flower, you also produce many other leaves and flowers. And it continues. And that is why when the time comes for you, this leaf, to disintegrate, you continue to be in the flower, in the roots, in other leaves. So there is no birth, no death, there is only a continuation, and the Sangha has been like that for two thousand and five hundred years.

So if you are someone who has just joined the community, the Sangha, you should practice looking deeply in order to see that when you come with us in Plum Village and become a member of the Sangha, you can become one with us, because your practice will make our happiness and our growth possible. And the practice of every other member of the Sangha will help you to grow and to be more beautiful. Suppose you are the teacher. As a dharma teacher, in principle you have to help other members of the Sangha to learn the Dharma and to practice the Dharma well; you have the duty to nourish your brothers and sisters in the Dharma, especially the younger brothers and sisters in the Dharma. But from the perspective of inter-being, it can be said the other way around also. Every leaf, every flower is doing the work of nourishing you as well, because each leaf, each flower is breathing, is alive, in order to manufacture the substance of life, nourishing the roots, nourishing other leaves, and nourishing you. So the teacher, while trying to nourish the students, is being nourished by his students as well. It’s very clear. When there is a student who is happy, who can smile, who can forgive, who can bloom like a flower, the teacher profits a lot from it, and he or she is nourished by his or her students. It’s like the leaves and the tree: the tree is the mother of the leaves, but the leaves are also mothers of the tree. So we inter-are in a very deep way. By being the Sangha we no longer risk to die, or to be born. Birth and death become just appearances.

In winter, we did not see any lotus flowers; we did not see any lotus leaves. Everything seemed to be disintegrating and becoming mud. That is because we looked only from the outside. If we touch deeply the reality of the lotus we know that the lotus roots underneath continue to grow, to get ready for the month of April, of May, and now, when you look into the lotus pond you see that the lotus leaves are beginning to come out again. That is rebirth, that is reappearance, and you can see a continuation, you can recognize yourself. The lotus leaf of last year can recognize herself in the lotus leaf of this year.

All our teachers are within us, all our ancestors are within us. The Buddha is within us. Every time we practice mindful walking, we nourish the Buddha within us. We allow the Buddha to continue to be alive. We need the Buddha of course, but the Buddha needs us to continue. Without us, how could the Buddha continue? This is clear. We need our ancestors to be, our blood ancestors and our spiritual ancestors, but our ancestors need us to be. If we feel free, if we feel solid, our ancestors feel free and solid. They need us very much. Therefore it is our duty to live, to be alive, to live with freedom and stability every day, in order to make it possible for our ancestors to be free and to be stable every day. How about our children and their children? Our children and their children are already in us, and if we know how to practice walking mindfully, breathing mindfully, doing things mindfully with stability and freedom, then we are nourishing our children, even if we don’t see them yet. But they are already there within us.

There are two dimensions. First, there is the dimension of time. We are here as the continuation of all our ancestors. All of our ancestors are in us. We are here representing all our children and their children, the future generations also in us. So every minute of our daily life we live for all of them also. You don’t see it, but the Buddha needs you in order to be carried to the future generations. The Buddha has been transmitted into many generations, and now that we have received the Buddha within ourselves, the seed of mindfulness, we allow the Buddha to have a chance here, and to have a chance in the future also. So this is the line representing time. And this is another line representing space, those that we can touch in the present moment. Not only are we all our ancestors and all our children, but we are all our brothers and sisters that are here and now in the present moment. And every minute of our daily lives, every thing that we practice is for the sake not only of our ancestors and children, but also for the sake of all our brothers and sisters that are there with us today. If we know how to live like that, despair, loneliness will disappear totally, because we embrace not only time, but also space. We embrace everyone.

Vimukti is a Sanskrit word meaning liberation, freedom. Do we have any freedom at all? Is there a seed of freedom in us that we can touch so that we can really enjoy our freedom? Sometimes in our daily lives we have the feeling that we have no freedom at all. Something carries us away from ourselves. We are being pushed all the time by tendencies within us. We tend to be forgetful. We tend to say and to do things that we don't want to say and do. We cannot be ourselves. We cannot be what we aspire to be. We are always defeated by our habit energies. Is there any freedom available to us? Where can we touch our freedom? And where is the key to unlock our freedom in us? We feel that we are always victims of our loneliness, our fear, our anger, and our suffering. And we want to be free from all these afflictions. What is the practice that can help us to be liberated from these kinds of afflictions? The answer is mindfulness, because mindfulness is the only freedom we have. Every day we do things like washing the dishes, washing our clothes, sweeping the floor, cooking, and writing. And we may be just enslaved by doing these things, but the moment we know how to generate the energy of mindfulness, we begin to have the element of freedom in us. Yes, you are scrubbing the floor, like yesterday, but today you do it mindfully. So during the time you scrub the floor like that, you begin to enjoy your liberty. Today you breathe like yesterday, but today you know how to breathe mindfully. I breathe in and I know I am breathing in. I breathe out and I know I am breathing out. The element of freedom becomes possible. That is the only freedom that is available to you. You are yourself; you are not a victim of your habit energy, of the world, of society, of education.

You take a step, and you become aware of the step that you take, and you take that step with freedom, because mindfulness is there in your step. The seed of freedom is there in the form of mindfulness, and that is the only way you can cultivate freedom and become a free person. First of all, you are free from your forgetfulness. Forgetfulness is the kind of veil, the kind of darkness, that overwhelms us, envelops us in our daily life. Forgetfulness is the opposite of mindfulness. And now we have a key in order to unlock the door of freedom, and that is mindfulness. So we should learn how to breathe mindfully, how to walk mindfully, how to drink our water mindfully, how to look at our brother and our sister mindfully, and suddenly the element of freedom is there. Mindfulness is the only liberty we have. And if we continue to cultivate mindfulness, our liberty will grow, and we will be able to transform all our afflictions, including our fear, our sorrow, our anger, and our despair. Mindfulness helps us to see deeply into the nature of ourselves, of our Sangha, and helps us to remove the idea of self, and of mind. The ideas of self, of me and of mine, are ideas that separate, that brings fear and despair. Once we enter into the reality of inter-being, all these fears and despair will vanish, and freedom finally becomes the freedom from fear, from isolation, and from despair.

I take refuge in the Sangha. This is not a statement of faith. I take refuge in the Sangha-- this is a matter of practice. You must be intelligent in order to practice taking refuge in the Sangha. In your daily life you have to look and touch in such a way that you can see that you are one with your brother, you are one with your sister, and every moment of your daily life is to nourish your Sangha, and be nourished by your Sangha. Anything you do for your brother is for yourself is for the Sangha. Everything you do for yourself is also for the Sangha and for your sister. And in the period of one day, twenty-four hours, there are a lot of opportunities for you to touch that truth. You know quite well that if the teacher is not happy, you cannot be happy, if your brother is not happy you cannot be happy, if you are not happy your brother and sister will not be happy. You know the truth of inter-being, and that is why you can practice according to your insight. Everything you do, everything you do not do, has an impact on your Sangha. Building a Sangha means building yourself. If the Sangha has stability and joy, then all of us will enjoy that stability and joy.

A young nun told me that since she has been a nun in Plum Village she has had the opportunity of having her mother, her father, her sister and her brother come to Plum Village and practice. If she had not become a nun, then her family would not have come to visit her and touch the Dharma and the practice here. So being a nun is an opportunity for your family to touch the Dharma and practice the Dharma, and by doing so you nourish not only your Sangha but also your blood family; you bring your family into the Sangha and your Sangha becomes part of your family, and your family becomes part of the Sangha. Practicing being stable, being peaceful, being joyful, you can write a letter home, and when your brother, your sister, your mother read that letter, they will be touched by your wisdom, your joy, and you are doing the work of nourishing your family. So everything you do in your daily life has the power of nourishing your blood family and your spiritual family.

You may not seem to do a lot, but by practicing mindful living in your Sangha, you are helping the world, you are serving the world. Because when we have a Sangha like that, a Sangha full of vitality, of mindfulness, and of understanding, then that will provide hope for many of us in the world. Many in the world are lost, and they don't know where to go. They don't believe that freedom is possible. They don't know that compassion and joy are possible. But when they come into contact with a Sangha that has joy, that has harmony, that has compassion, they

have a chance. They realize that freedom is something possible, compassion is something possible, and joy is something possible, and they are able to find a meaning for their life. Because many people tend to believe that happiness is made of money and sensual pleasures, and they run after money and sensual pleasures and they suffer quite a lot and they don't see any meaning to their life. Now they have a chance, when they come in touch with a Sangha, which has compassion, stability, and freedom, they begin to see a meaning to their life. They may devote their life to the cultivation of freedom, of compassion and of joy. That is why your daily practice is very important, every step you make, every breath you take, everything you do in your daily life in mindfulness will have a tremendous impact on yourself, your Sangha, and on the world.

[End of Dharma Talk]